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ABSTRACT

A Master of Arts in Technical and Expository Writing program has been implemented in the English department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Designed to make future teachers and technical writers into better writers, the program gives them a larger view of the writing process in which they are participating. Three required courses make up the core of the program: composition theory, rhetorical theory, and linguistic theory. The applied section of the program contains an expository option for candidates with an interest in theory and a general application of writing skills and a technical option for students who wish to train specifically as technical, business, and government writers. The third component of the program is a final project that involves students in a major writing project, either a conventional thesis, an applied project, or an internship with portfolio. A cognate of up to nine hours taken in other departments comprises the fourth component. The program is successful in that it can be done well within a conventional English department. (SRT)

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DESIGNING AN APPLIED WRITING M.A. WITHIN A TRADITIONAL ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

The program I'll be describing for you is entitled the Master of Arts in Technical and Expository writing. The degree is offered by the English Department of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR). Our department started planning the program in committee in the fall of 1982. By late in the fall of the following year, we had prepared a one-hundred page proposal for the degree. During the next year and a half the degree moved through seven administrative levels, some levels having steps (which in effect adds levels); the degree was approved at the state level--the final level of approval for programs in Arkansas--in July 1985. We spent the next year passing the course work through curriculum committees and recruiting students for the program. The academic year that we are now completing is the first year in which we have offered courses. We have a head count of 30 students, and an FTE of 20, which is twice as many as we wanted for the first year. These facts are intended as a preface for the observations that follow.

As Maxine Hairston says, "This decade is a very good time to be a writing teacher. Those of us who were foresighted or brash or lucky enough to have chosen this career five or ten years ago now find ourselves in the midst of a ferment of professional activity. Our researchers are getting grant money, our organizations are growing, our graduate programs are proliferating . . ." (Hairston, 13).

Of course, graduate writing programs of all stripes are growing. Focusing for the moment on master's degrees in technical writing, I can easily

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illustrate that growth. In 1981, the Society for Technical Communication (STC) tabulated and reported information on eight graduate programs (STC, 1981). By 1985, that number was eighteen (STC, 1985). I suspect--and so does the STC--that the numbers would be higher if all programs were reported. (Our graduate program, just to name one, was not ready in time to report to the STC for the 1985 listing). I also suspect that the growth from eight to eighteen approximates the relative increase of these programs through these years.

In short, when we set out to develop our graduate writing program, we were not doing something new under the sun; we were joining a movement. Although we were not unique in wanting to offer a graduate degree in writing, how we accommodated our program to our resources may be unique, as the way in which each program accommodates itself may be unique. Further, I think there is value in looking closely at how one program--the program I worked on--did accommodate itself. And I'm interested in how other programs accommodate themselves. At the entry stage of development, I see accommodation as one of the keys to program success.

Some years before I arrived at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (and that was five years ago) the English department had proposed offering a conventional M.A. in literary study. But the department had been turned down, and, as a consequence, did not have a conventional master's degree from which to build a writing program--in fact, had only meager experience at all in scheduling graduate courses. There was, though, at least one advantage in not having an existing M.A. in literature. We could build the program from the ground up as a writing program. We would not have to build in existing graduate requirements (say, for example, 6 hours of British literature in periods before 1798).

Although disappointed in its bid for the conventional M.A., the literature faculty was very supportive of the efforts of the writing faculty to get the M.A. in writing. For one thing, the degree we finally proposed was not so very alien after all. While there was no required literature in the program, some of the terms in the course titles had a familiar ring: rhetorical, linguistic, expository, persuasive, and style. These were courses that they could teach, if they took a mind to. Some of the other terms--technical, report, business, and editing--though far from literature, had been around some English departments for decades. In short, the entire department was ready to see what kind of benefits a graduate program might bring.

The decision to go ahead with the development of a graduate level degree program came from two influences. One influence was external. The state coordinator of a writing project for high school teachers commented on the need that Arkansas had for a graduate degree in expository writing-- and suggested that he could send students our way. (As it turned out, few students actually came from his way, but his encouragement was important in the early stages of our thinking.) His offer to help reminded us that there was a vast writing market out there to serve--K-12 teachers.

The other influence was our own observation of the radical increase in junior and senior undergraduate courses in writing. The growth was especially strong in applied writing, specifically technical writing and business writing. Growing strength in upper-division writing classes is a national trend, and in itself not sufficient to justify a graduate program. But we took particular note of the fact that our upper-division courses often enrolled students who already had degrees and were taking undergraduate

courses because we had so little at the graduate level. Most of them, to be sure, didn't want graduate degrees in writing, but they did want advanced and specialized course work in writing that would help them in their careers. These students, we assumed, would help us fill classes while we developed enough reputation to draw healthy numbers of full-time degree candidates.

As it turned out, then, we had two potential audiences--teachers and would-be technical writers--that on the surface of things did not seem to have the same interests. We were not confident that we could run a successful program for only one of these audiences, so we wanted to develop a program that would serve both (serve both well, I should add). The dual audience, though, made for interesting problems. That is, how do you combine graduate level writing for teachers (and, largely, we assumed high school teachers) and graduate level technical writing for students oriented toward technology, engineering, science, and business? The answer may be perfectly obvious to you, but it was not at that time obvious to us. I won't bother you with the evolution of our thinking on the two audiences. But at the end of our planning we had a degree entitled the Master of Arts in Technical and Expository writing. We designed an expository option for candidates with in interest in theory and a general application of writing skills. These we assumed would be the teachers, to whom we could offer a writing degree without offending the College of Education. The technical option, of course, is there for students who wish to train specifically as technical, business, and government writers. ("Technical," of course, is often the term used loosely to include all the forms of applied writing.)

This dual audience is one of our special accommodations, and it has worked out nicely for us. First, it helped us in the primary design of the

program. We knew we could not offer a complete set of courses for both audiences. But the need to serve both audiences forced us to determine the materials appropriate for all our students and the material appropriate for specific options. In this manner we arrived at a structure that included a core area with applied options. Again, this structure seems like no great thing now, but during the planning stage it was a major breakthrough in our thinking. But before I talk about the specific program features, I would like to look at a few more of the major issues surrounding our program design.

Let's look at a very obvious question: what should a writing program do? Write, we suspect. But otherwise the answer isn't so entirely clear. Are we to make our graduates into practitioneers of writing? Obviously, students come to creative writing programs to become writers. But would this necessarily be the case, totally, with a technical and expository program? We would assume that people in the technical option would want writing skills. But would some students, especially those in the expository option, have more need of--and interest in--content? Of course, content is important, and with all the research done in recent decades--not to mention what has accumulated over the centuries in rhetoric--there is a fair body of content to present in a writing program.

The easy answer is that you should bo both. In fact, the easier answer is that you should do everything you can. But, finally, choices must be made. We decided that whatever else the program might do, one of the things it had to do was help students develop strong writing skills. One important measure of our emphasis on writing is that we review writing samples from all applicants, and we give the writing potential of the applicant considerable weight in our admissions decisions. The emphasis on writing skills is the

visceral level of our program--we want to help students realize that they can be truly good writers. As the program advisor, I eventually speak to all candidates. I am surprised (but pleasantly so) at the number who tell me that they think they are becoming better writers--and how good this makes them feel.

On the other hand, we think that people who become writers in our program should know why they are good writers. Although it is a second priority, it is a strong one nonetheless. Plenty of people write well without the slightest idea of how they are able to do it. It seems, though, that formal course work should help us discover why we are good writers. Writers with a good grasp of theory are in a position to understand why they are good writers. Of course, all the recent (or not so recent) research on the writing process is prime material for courses that are to help students recognize good writing.

These two concerns--to make the candidates into better writers and to give candidates a larger view of the writing process in which they are participating--underlie the two largest chunks of the program we designed. We have not articulated our priorities much beyond this point, but I want to return to the issue of program priorities in a minute. For now I would like, at last, to take a look at the specific parts of the program we designed (a program description is attached).

The first major section, what we call the Core, consists of nine hours--three three-hours courses. These are the theory courses; they are required, there is no choice. By catalog number, they are in a particular-to-general order--Composition Theory, Rhetorical Theory, and Linguistic Theory. They are easier to explain, though, in reverse order. Linguistic theory

introduces students to language in current, objective, scientific terms. Rhetorical theory introduces the student to purpose in language, and composition theory introduces the student to the process by which the individual writer fulfills purpose in language.

The applied sections reflect the two audiences for whom we originally designed the program. One option allows course work in technical writing and other forms of applied writing, and it presumably brings writing down to the needs of the marketplace. The second option we call expository, and there deal more with the writing of factual prose as a generic activity. The intent of these courses is to focus on writing skills. We provide growing room in the options by allowing for special topics courses. In this way we can offer specialties without writing them permanently into the program.

Of course, in actually offering a program, rarely can you achieve a pure separation of theory and practice. Nor would you want to. Our theory courses require writing--a lot of it--and students are expected to write well in these classes. Similarly, our applied courses necessarily introduce theory. Despite the inevitable overlap of the core and the applied options, we are quite clear on what we want to emphasize and what we expect from students. In the core, we present things we want our students to know. Writing in those courses is used as a method of learning. In the options, we offer writing activities. Content gives context to the activities.

If students comments are any indication, then the curricular division has been effective. I hear students say, "Theory really is interesting, but I'm ready to do some writing" (they say this despite the fact that they are writing papers for the theory courses). Then I hear students say, "I like doing this writing, but I'd be interested knowing more about what's behind all

this." I think these statements are an indication that the parts of the program are doing what they are supposed to do.

I'd like to be able to say that in the third component students achieve that special fusion of theory and application. If that happens, then so much the better. But the main purpose of the Final Project component is to engage students in a major writing project. As you see from the handout, we offer three choices: a conventional thesis, an applied project, and an internship (with portfolio). In comparing our Final Project requirement to other programs, we were a little surprised to find that fewer than half of the 18 programs listed by STC clearly stated some form of culminating activity, whether thesis or other form of writing project (STC, 1985). Of course, such requirements could be buried in fuller descriptions of the programs. We saw the need for some form of rigorous closing project to give students the opportunity to prove themselves. Since this is our first year, we've not had a student complete a final project. Their reaction to the requirement, though, indicates that we may get more variety than expected. Originally, we assumed that the people in the expository option would be writing the conventional theses, whereas those in the technical option would be more likely to serve an internship or complete an applied project. But one candidate from the expository track has indicated her interest in preparing a writing-across-the-curriculum handbook for her high school, or what would seem to be an applied project. One of the delightful features of participating in the development of a new program is to see its potential reveal itself.

The fourth component we designate the Cognate. It looks more purposeful than it is. Ideally, it stands as an opportunity for the student to gain a cross-curricular perspective on writing. Presumably, students could go to

allied fields in order to enrich their view of writing, say in journalism or communication. Another use of the cognate is to allow students to gain background in a field in which they might like to apply their writing. One problem we have encountered in offering the cognate is that some of the graduate courses that students would like to take (especially in business and in computers) require undergraduate prerequisites. Usually students don't have the time or inclination to take the prerequisites. Luckily, many departments offer service graduate courses, and some departments have offered, or plan to offer, courses designed for our students (cognitive psychology and ethnography are two that come to mind).

At worst, the cognate can be a useless grab-bag of courses that the student takes in order to fill out the nine hours. I don't think any of our students have consciously done that, but the potential is always there. Another seductive use of the cognate is to allow students who want to transfer from another graduate program to enter ours with a nine-hour head start. Handling this problem takes a fair amount of administrative honesty. Do those nine hours in animal husbandry make a good cognate for the student who wants to transfer into our department? Candidates can come up with ingenious defenses. We stay pretty honest because we have a graduate dean watching our transfer requests very closely.

I'd like to make two final comments on the cognate, one spurious and one significant. For the spurious comment: cognates can be useful in getting other departments to support your bid for program approval. The more serious point is that the cognate is, finally, the means by which we give students the things they need that we can't give. As our department develops broader

expertise, we may well cut down the size of the cognate offering--although I don't think that we would ever want to eliminate it entirely.

I'll conclude by returning to the issue of program priorities. I've told you what our program does; now let me tell you what it doesn't do. It doesn't do any of scores of things I've seen in other programs. We don't have separate course work in graphics and design, production management, technological transfer, book publishing, communication theory, technology and values, or many of the other wonderful courses I see that are part of other programs. Someday I hope we can offer some of these courses, and when we can we have a place for them in the structure of the program. The restriction that we have chosen for now--writing skills and theory--limit us greatly. But we have designed a program that can be done, and done well, within a conventional English department. We do not offer a degree in technical communication, strictly speaking. We offer technical writing as one of the subsets of factual prose. Often we were sorely tempted to build in components that looked good (computer graphics and the like) but were outside our expertise. Finally, we didn't propose much that we couldn't do well, and we're better off for not succumbing to panic.

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Department of English, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

CURRICULUM FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS IN TECHNICAL AND EXPOSITORY WRITING

The degree plan has four parts:

1. Core (9 hours): All candidates must take the three courses in the core.

7310, Composition Theory [new]
7311, Rhetorical Theory [new]
7312, Linguistic Theory [new]

2. Program Options (12 hours): our program has two options, one for students who wish to train specifically as technical, business, and government writers and one for students who wish to focus more on writing theory and a more general application of writing skills.

Option #1: Technical, Business, and Government Writing. If you choose this option, you must take at least nine hours from the courses listed below.

5302, Technical Reports [an existing senior course cross-listed with graduate courses]
5304, Technical Style and Editing [same as above]
5306, Writing for Business and Government [same as above]
7399, Writing Research Proposals and Reports [an existing graduate course that serves a general audience]
7140, 7240, 7340, Topics in Technical, Business, and Government Writing [new]

Option #2: Expository Writing and Composition. If you choose this option, you must take at least nine hours from the courses listed below.

5315, Advanced Persuasive Writing [a new course to serve both the undergraduate program and the graduate program]
5317, Advanced Expository Writing [same as above]
7320, Working with Writers [new]
7130, 7230, 7330, Topics in Expository Writing [new]

3. Cognate Area (up to nine hours): you may take up to nine hours outside the field of English. The graduate coordinator must approve the courses chosen for the cognate area.

4. Exit Project (6 hours): You must complete an exit project for which you will receive six hours credit (8300, 8301, Final Project [new]). You will choose from three options:

1. Thesis: You may do extended research on an academic topic in writing.

2. Applied writing project: You may write an instruction manual, employee guide, or similar on-the-job document. We assume projects of demanding scope.

3. Extensive internship with written reports: You may work on the job and develop a portfolio of applied writing projects.

Each exit project requires an oral defense and examination.